I have sometimes seen builders attach string to wood stakes driven into the ground to outline a prospective building perimeter so as to study its potential location prior to final siting. What is this process called, and how does it work?

The process you're describing is generally called **staking out** (or simply **staking**) a building, and in more formal construction and surveying terminology it's often referred to as **setting out** or **layout**. In North American building practice, "staking out" is used casually among builders, while "setting out" is more common in civil engineering and British usage.

At its simplest, it's the practice of marking the proposed position of a structure on the ground—before excavation or foundation work—so the builder, architect, or owner can visualize where the building will actually sit relative to property boundaries, other structures, or site features. In its more precise form, it's a method of transferring a building plan from paper (or CAD) into full-scale marks on the site with accurate dimensions and angles.

How it works in practice

1. **Reference points and measurements**
   The process begins with known reference points—often a surveyed property corner, a benchmark elevation, or a fixed feature like a road centerline. Using these as a starting point, the crew measures out the distances and angles corresponding to the plan dimensions. This is usually done with a tape measure, a surveyor's total station, or a builder's level and measuring rod.
2. **Driving stakes**
   Wooden stakes—often 1×2 or 2×2 hardwood or softwood pieces—are driven into the ground at key points: the building's corners, offsets from the corners, or locations for batter boards (which are horizontal boards attached to stakes set back from the building line). These stakes may be temporary "witness stakes" that simply mark positions, or part of a more permanent setup for string lines.
3. **Attaching string lines**
   String (mason's line or nylon cord) is stretched between stakes to represent the edges of the building's footprint. If batter boards are used, the strings are fastened to nails or screws on the boards so they can be moved up and down or adjusted without disturbing the ground stakes. Strings can mark the outside of foundation walls, the centerlines of walls, or excavation limits.
4. **Checking for squareness and dimensions**
   The crew verifies that the layout matches the plans in both dimension and squareness. A common method is the **3-4-5 triangle** rule (a practical application of the Pythagorean theorem) to ensure right angles, or the diagonal measurement check (measuring both diagonals of a rectangle to confirm they match).
5. **Visualization and adjustment**
   At this stage—especially in the informal, "let's see how it sits" version you've described—builders, owners, or designers can walk the site, look at the strings, and imagine the building in place. Adjustments can be made before any irreversible work begins. This is especially helpful when siting a building in a constrained lot, working around trees, or optimizing views and sunlight.
6. **Transition to construction**
   Once approved, these lines and stakes form the physical guide for excavation and foundation formwork. The strings themselves are removed before actual digging, but the offset stakes or batter boards remain so the lines can be re-established later.

Key distinctions:

- **Informal staking out** – Often done quickly with minimal measuring to get a "feel" for the placement. Useful for client walkthroughs before committing to a spot.
- **Formal setting out** – Done by a surveyor or site engineer with precise instruments to ensure the building complies with legal boundaries, zoning setbacks, and design dimensions.

If you've ever seen a lot with wood stakes and bright string crisscrossing it, you're essentially looking at a 1:1 scale blueprint of the building, built in string. It's low-tech but highly effective—part practical guide, part visualization tool.